CHAPTER ONE

Counseling in Schools: Problems and Solutions

Picture yourself right out of graduate school with a degree in school counseling, eager to demonstrate your effectiveness counseling kids at a school that has just hired you as their school counselor. You have wanted to be a school counselor for as long as you can remember.

A year passes and the picture has dimmed. You have become overwhelmed with your assigned responsibilities and find little time to counsel kids. When you make the time to counsel students, you find yourself feeling discouraged because you only have time to give students a few sessions, and this leaves you thinking, "What can I accomplish in a few sessions, so why bother?" Because your main motivation in becoming a school counselor was to counsel students, you become disillusioned and question your decision to enter the field.

Then a flicker of hope appears with the development of a counseling model that seems ideally suited for schools. This recent approach, called solution-focused brief counseling (SFBC), shows promise because it focuses on students' assets rather than their deficits, and only a few meetings are needed to help students get on track to resolving their issues. Because many of the steps in the SFBC process resemble techniques learned in other approaches, the model is relatively easy for you to master.

As you use this new approach to change the focus of counseling from problems to solutions, you begin to notice a change in the students you counsel. They seem more confident as they begin to recognize their strengths and resources that were previously unnoticed. You observe your students repeating their successes, which in turn beget other successes. Your sessions have a positive focus, leaving you and your students feeling upbeat. And because the students are doing all the work in your counseling meetings, you are going home after work energized and full of hope.

This sounds too good to be true; however, practicing SFBC in schools can help counselors deliver the kind of assistance that drew them to the profession, and it does brighten counselors' outlooks. As one elementary school counselor described, she no longer goes home depressed, thinking of all the unpleasant conditions her students face. Instead, she focuses on solutions and achieving goals. She noted, "I find myself more helpful to children more of the time and that makes me feel great knowing I'm doing what my title describes" (M. Cavitt, personal communication, February 15, 1996).

But why are so many school counselors feeling they can't deliver the help they were trained to give? Practicing school counselors commonly cite the lack of training in counseling strategies that can actually be applied given the realities of a school setting. Counselor education programs typically emphasize theoretical models of counseling that require longer-term therapy than school counselors have time to offer or that school districts want for their students. School counselors do not have the time or the training to provide such therapy. Long-term therapy implies in-depth assistance, which is beyond the scope of the school counselor's work. Although it is important for counselors to understand the theoretical underpinnings of psychoanalytic, psychodynamic, gestalt, behavioral, transactional analysis, rational emotive behavioral, Adlerian, and person-centered counseling, expecting school counselors to apply these models in a school setting is unrealistic.

Moreover, most counseling approaches used in counselor education programs focus on problems, thus implying that something is wrong with the client. This emphasis on deficits usually leads to an extensive and time-consuming exploration of problems, etiology, histories, and causes.

The media also contribute to the concept that those needing counseling have deficits and have failed in some aspect of their lives (Downing & Harrison, 1992). Television and newspaper ads that promote counseling accentuate people's inability to cope with everyday issues. Students exposed to these descriptions may see themselves as dysfunctional and believe that seeking help would further emphasize their negative attributes. With this perspective, students' reluctance to talk to counselors who stress their faults is understandable.

As a general rule, students who do see counselors are often referred by school personnel or parents. Rather than being "customers" of counseling, they come as visitors, usually honoring either a request or an ultimatum, and therefore do not commit themselves to the process. The real customers are the parents, teachers, administrators, or other adults who want the student changed. They own the problem. Counselors also can inadvertently be transformed into customers if they become more interested in change than do the children they serve (Kral, 1994). Youth who are referred to counselors may view counseling as really serving those who sent them, which results in resistance.

The difficulties of providing effective counseling are compounded by the expectations that immediate observable changes will occur. The managed-care trend reflects what is now demanded in the mental health arena. Counseling is to be effective and quick because mental health providers are required to limit the number of sessions for which they will be paid. Overburdened teachers, like managed-care providers, are frustrated with their students' behavior, academic problems, or both. They send youth to the counselor for a quick fix as if the counselor had a magic wand. Failure to rehabilitate an individual instantly can result in teachers losing confidence in counselors and the counseling process.

The more counselors are seen as failing to furnish essential counseling services and programs, the more school communities question counselors' value in schools. In the past, the school principal's needs and perceptions of the counselor's role influenced practices. Now, as a result of recent national trends to restructure schools, teachers and parents have a greater say in staffing local schools. Counselors now answer to an increasing number of decision makers responsible for personnel assignments. If counselors don't distinguish themselves as providing

programs and services that help youth remedy their academic, behavioral, and interpersonal difficulties, their positions may be in jeopardy. Questioning the need for school counselors has already begun. Some school districts have contracted privately with psychologists, social workers, and local mental health agencies to provide counseling to students—counseling that was previously rendered by school counselors. Unless we school counselors respond to these changes, we will be relegated to being glorified clerks. Fortunately, school counselors now have an innovative counseling approach in solution-focused brief counseling (SFBC) that provides a solution to this predicament.

School administrators also often find themselves serving as counselors, as well, especially in schools with small enrollments and limited funds, where school counselors may not be available. Even in schools where counselors serve, in some situations the principal or assistant principal would benefit from using counseling methods with students. Extensive formal training in the field of counseling or psychology is not a prerequisite to implementing SFBC with students. The step-by-step methods described in this book can be implemented very effectively by administrators as well as counselors. Throughout the book, where the term "counselor" is used, the term "administrator" can be substituted. The SFBC approach described in this book will provide school administrators the skills necessary to implement a form of counseling that will be compatible with their role as administrators.

A NEW SOLUTION

Through the work of a number of innovative practitioners (Berg & Steiner, 2003; Berg & Miller, 1992; deShazer, 1985; O'Hanlon & Weiner-Davis, 1989; Selekman, 1997; Walter & Peller, 1992), a model of counseling has emerged that can have tremendous impact in school settings. Recently, this potential has been recognized in a number of articles that have appeared (Bruce, 1995; LaFountain, Garner, & Eliason, 1996; Murphy, 1994; Pelsma, 2000; Sklare, 2000; Thompson & Littrell, 1998). DeJong and Berg (1998) reported that 78% of children 12 years old and younger and 89% of children 13–18 years of age made progress toward their goals in counseling 7–9 months after SFBC.

In his early work with this approach to counseling, deShazer began to ask clients to notice what was better in their lives between sessions (deShazer & Molnar, 1964). Attention to problems that brought clients into counseling was not part of the assignment. It is remarkable that two thirds of his clients reported that things were better by their next session. Among the one third who did not indicate that things were better, half of these clients began to discover improvements that had first gone unnoticed.

It is interesting that many of the things that clients reported were better had nothing to do with the problem that had brought them into counseling in the first place. This was significant—solutions were occurring but often went unrecognized unless attention was redirected to highlight these successes. It also reflected a shift in emphasis from the traditional problem focus to a solution focus, where exploring the problem was minimized. For example, depressed clients are not always depressed, for there are times when depression is absent. Likewise, clients could identify times when the problems that brought them into counseling were absent.

Weiner-Davis, deShazer, and Gingerich (1987) concluded that perhaps positive change could take place even before the first counseling meeting. They began to ask those who called for appointments to notice between then and the time they came in for their first appointment what was better in their lives. Amazingly, they reported the same results that deShazer found with the task assigned for clients to accomplish between sessions. Clients concluded that perhaps the problems had been overemphasized. This finding led deShazer and his colleagues to conclude that focusing on solutions rather than problems would be far more effective, a major philosophical shift in the counseling field. Basically, they found that in counseling you tend to get more of whatever you talk about, whether positive or negative.

The movement to a solution focus removed the need for in-depth exploration of the historical antecedents of clients' problems. Taking the investigation of the causes and origins of problems out of the process dramatically shortens the time needed for counseling. When the focus is on solutions, counseling becomes brief. Moreover, as the focus changes to solutions, actions become of primary importance and insight is deemphasized. These outcomes make SFBC an effective model for working with children. Because insight is not necessary, this approach offers a good fit, for

at some levels, youth do not have the cognitive skills essential to understand where they are and how they got there in the same way adults are able to grasp these concepts (Kral, 1994). Although identified as therapy by its founders, this approach is more appropriately considered counseling rather than therapy for several reasons (Littrell, Malia, Nichols, et al., 1992): The approach is relatively easy to master, it emphasizes problem solving and student-produced solutions, and assistance is provided in a school setting.

Solution-focused counselors found that by using their clients' words, counseling became easier for clients to comprehend. By using students' language, counseling was actually personalized to meet their needs. Students' abilities to communicate at a familiar level and to recognize that they are understood creates an ideal situation.

Another aspect of this method suits children well—the focus on using language that directs them to take positive actions. Children arrive at counselors' or administrators' doors most often because either they or the person referring them wants them to *stop* doing something (fighting, disrupting, talking, playing). Negative goals are very difficult to accomplish because, to imagine themselves not doing something, children must replace those thoughts with something concrete. Developmentally, children need examples of what they are to *start* doing. The solution focus presents children with what they *can* do.

SFBC also calls for clients to determine their outcome goals for counseling. Counseling focuses on clients' desires, not on the desires of the counselor or administrator. Clients are viewed as being their own experts—they know what is best for them. Having faith in clients' ability to identify their goals conveys confidence and respect, and when children are permitted to determine their own agenda for counseling, resistance diminishes. Giving up the role of the expert who knows what's best for students may be difficult for counselors and administrators. Effectiveness in using this method depends on the willingness to embrace this belief in the client's abilities; to allow clients to do all the work and assume all the responsibility; and to recognize that regardless of clients' past experiences or background, change for the better is possible.

Many of the skills associated with SFBC are shared with other counseling models in the field. Listening, responding with empathy, asking open-ended questions, supporting, reinforcing, identifying

goals, and applying scaling methods are but a few of the techniques SFBC has in common with other mental health applications. Therefore, the transition to a solution-based approach becomes easier than you might imagine to adapt to your own style of practice.

As with any counseling model, this approach may not be effective with all students. Some may not want to be "fixed" because they may just want someone to listen to them. Students who have recently experienced a loss may not yet be ready to find solutions. Others may be cautious about your new approach and reject your assistance. Making students aware of your rationale for using this different approach with them may help alleviate their suspicion.

Keep in mind, SFBC is just another approach school counselors and administrators can use in addition to others found to be effective with students.

To personalize some of the concepts alluded to thus far, consider the following six questions:

1. If a miracle happened during the night while you were sleeping and the next day the problem of not having the time to counsel students were solved, what would be different?
2. What would you be doing that you weren't doing before?
3. Who other than you would see this difference in your behavior, and how would they respond to this difference in you?
4. When have some parts of this miracle already occurred, even during those times when you typically get sidetracked from counseling? What is different about these times?
5. On a scale of 0–10, with 0 being 100% dissatisfaction with your opportunity to counsel students and 10 representing the day after the miracle occurred and 100% satisfaction with the counseling you are providing, where would you place yourself on that scale now?
6. When you have moved up the scale just 10%, what will you be doing differently from what you are doing now?

These are the kinds of questions solution-focused counselors ask their clients. Answering these questions is the first step in personally beginning to comprehend the SFBC process. The central

philosophy of SFBC provides the framework for the assumptions and concepts that guide this approach. Following a discussion of SFBC with diverse populations is a review of this philosophy, the assumptions, and the guiding concepts.

SFBC WITH DIVERSE POPULATIONS

Public schools have increasing numbers of students from culturally diverse backgrounds (Holcomb-McCoy, 2001). In fact, projections indicate that, by 2020, the majority of students in public schools will come from diverse cultural, ethnic, and/or racial backgrounds (Campbell, 1994). In some cases, cultural differences can be associated with issues related to trust. Some reports indicate that this may be particularly true for African American students (Biafora, Taylor, Warheit, Zimmerman, & Vega, 1993; Phelps, Taylor, & Gerard, 2001). In other cases, help with problems is traditionally sought from within the family, causing students to feel uncomfortable or unfamiliar with the idea of seeking help from a school counselor or administrator. This may be the case for children from a Latino background (Altarriba & Bauer, 1998). With children of Latino decent being the fastest growing population of school-aged children in the United States (Aviles, Guerrero, Horwarth, & Thomas, 1999), schools need to find ways to best serve these students.

The issues related to cultural differences have led administrators and counselors to seek a new understanding of how best to provide counseling services to students from a variety of cultural backgrounds. As an example of the attention being directed to these needs, an entire issue of the *Journal of Counseling and Development* (Robinson & Ginter, 1999) was devoted to the issue of diverse populations and the need for special care when counseling people from different cultural backgrounds.

Fortunately, many characteristics of the solution-focused approach make it an ideal counseling approach with diverse populations. SFBC sessions focus on clients' experiences within their own frames of reference—not the counselor's—and on discussion of solutions rather than problems. In addition, SFBC uses the client's terms and phrases rather than the counselor's, recognizes that clients are the best experts on themselves, and focuses on strengths rather than weaknesses. These aspects of the SFBC model help

clients from diverse backgrounds overcome their resistance to counseling.

Support for SFBC with multicultural populations is beginning to surface. The first edition of this book has been translated into Japanese and Korean, and inquiries about translating the book into Chinese are being pursued. An e-mail message I received from a Japanese counselor indicated that the SFBC approach was more effective in working with Japanese clients than other counseling approaches she had used. DeJong and Berg (1998) found that 80% of African American clients and 82% of Latino clients (although the study had a small sample of Latino clients) compared to 71% of Caucasian clients of all ages either met their goals or made progress toward their goals as a result of SFBC. Many of the cases presented in this book were with African American students who came from poor neighborhoods. The success of these students in overcoming their difficulties was inspirational.

CENTRAL PHILOSOPHY

As with any counseling model, there are rules of thumb that reflect the core beliefs and lead to the most effective use for SFBC. DeShazer (1987, p. 59) and Berg and Miller (1992, p. 17) have proposed three basic rules for counselors using SFBC.

The first rule is the old saying, "If it ain't broke, don't fix it." Making an issue out of something that is not an issue for clients can cause difficulties in areas that were previously manageable to them. Counselors should focus on generating solutions, not additional concerns. Clients need to work on what they see as causing them difficulties; otherwise, the counselor's agenda becomes the focus of counseling. Following this rule means that counselors subscribe to the philosophy that clients—not the counselor—determine the goals for counseling.

Rule two is, "Once you know what works, do more of it." Recognizing those interventions that clients report as successful gives the counselor valuable information. Once successes are identified, counselors have clients replicate them. The temptation to become more elegant or try something different to move more quickly should be avoided. An assignment that has previously worked has an excellent chance of succeeding again.

In the big picture, clients tend to miss things that are working for them. They tend to direct attention instead to what is wrong and not working. Problems grow disproportionately in relation to the solutions, which generally go unnoticed. People tend to describe problems as always happening or goals as never being attained. These absolutes are not true 100% of the time. Students aren't always tardy for class, always disturbing the teacher, or never doing homework. There are instances when they are on time, are cooperating with the teacher, or are taking responsibility for doing their homework. These moments of success are frequently forgotten or generally unrecognized. Therefore, it is important for counselors to pay particular attention to indications of what works for each and every client so that these solutions can be replicated. In adhering to this rule, counselors commit to the belief that all people have been successful in overcoming their problems at various times in their lives. They have the ability to succeed again.

The third rule states, "If it doesn't work, don't do it again. Do something different." The American work ethic promotes the concept that "If at first you don't succeed, try, try again." When trying again, it is important to use different strategies to yield different results. In counseling, however, when confronted with difficulties, clients tend to use the same familiar coping strategies because that is all they already know how to do. Walter and Peller (1992) describe a common example of this phenomenon, wherein people repeat ineffective strategies over and over. People often misplace an item such as a wallet or a set of keys. On searching for the item and not finding it on the kitchen table, they check the dresser in the bedroom unsuccessfully, followed by the counter in the bathroom, and then back to the kitchen table once again. If the item was not on the table before, why would it be there now? Repeating something that didn't work doesn't make sense; continued exploration in new locations is a more logical choice. Subscribing to this third rule helps counselors reformulate their ideas about resistance, because when clients demonstrate reluctance or appear uncooperative, they actually are telling counselors what does not work for them.

SOLUTION-FOCUSED ASSUMPTIONS

The basic philosophy of any counseling approach carries with it basic assumptions counselors need to internalize for the model

to work. Adhering to these assumptions keeps the counselor on track. Various solution-focused practitioners articulate in their own way the assumptions inherent in the solution-focused approach. Walter and Peller (1992) are to be credited with the basics of the assumptions that follow.

The first assumption contends that when we concentrate on successes, beneficial changes will take place. The focus needs to be directed toward what is right and working for clients as opposed to what's wrong and troublesome. Practicing "solution talk" rather than "problem talk" facilitates the process. This is a rather difficult assignment for novice solution-focused counselors because most mental health providers have been conditioned to look for problems.

Shifting from problem to solution identification requires conscious effort and repeated practice.

Many years ago, this concept was exemplified in the forward-thinking work of Hosford, Moss, and Morrell (1976) with stuttering inmates. After recording conversations with prisoners, a second recording was made from the original with all stuttering edited out. The convicts listened to the edited recording that featured their talking without any trace of stuttering. Their stuttering was significantly reduced as a result of focusing on the positive and the solution rather than the problem. The same solution approach was implemented with a university basketball player to improve his free throw shooting. An edited video that demonstrated his shooting free throws with perfect form and accuracy was prepared. Prior to games and practice, he watched the tape, then closed his eyes and imagined himself shooting with perfect form. His habit of only focusing on the solution—an accurate shot—resulted in his missing only one free throw for the entire season!

The second assumption asserts that every problem has identifiable exceptions that can be found and transformed into solutions. Clients are inclined to view their problems as always happening, when, in reality, their problems fade away at times. Clients become so immersed with their issues that they often fail to see the instances when the problem isn't present. Clients fail to recognize the significance of these exceptions. It is up to counselors to listen carefully for hints that signal where, when, and how exceptions occur as a step in helping clients develop solutions.

Jean, a seventh-grade girl, requested help because she and her older sister, a junior in high school, didn't communicate often, and when they did, they constantly argued about who was right

and who was wrong. Then, each tried to prove the other wrong with a report to their father. Jean desired to end this conflict.

After the counselor inquired about when their relationship was somewhat better, Jean recalled an incident 2 months earlier in which she and her sister talked about what was going on in their lives, and for a few days afterward, they didn't argue or report to their dad. Jean recalled that her sister even "took up for her" on one occasion. Although the exception was hard to find initially, with some probing it was rediscovered. Jean was assigned the task of doing more of what worked. In the second meeting a week later, Jean reported that she had been talking with her sister and had stopped telling on her, and her sister had responded similarly. They started to become allies and to do some things together. Jean's father remarked to Jean and her sister that he had noticed fewer quarrels and that he was happier seeing this. This was apparent to Jean as she noted that he began to smile more when he came home. The identifiable solutions were there all the time, hidden in the exceptions to Jean's problem. All it took to get Jean on track toward a healthier relationship with her sister was three meetings of teamwork between Jean and her counselor.

The third assumption is that small changes have a ripple effect that expands into larger changes. Once people get to know one another, they become somewhat predictable and come to anticipate each other's behaviors. When clients alter their behaviors ever so slightly, it causes a chain reaction in response to the initial change. Those affected by the change find themselves adjusting their responses, which in turn elicits further changes in clients. As in Jean's situation, when she became supportive of her sister, her sister became supportive of her. They began to do things with one another. The changes between the sisters also had an observable, positive effect on their father.

The fourth assumption recognizes that all clients have what it takes to resolve their difficulties. Who knows clients better—so why not use their expertise? By highlighting clients' strengths and how these strengths are initiated rather than focusing on deficits, changes occur more rapidly. Counselors and clients together face the task of fully exposing moments of success and, perhaps most important, identifying what clients have done to make these moments happen. Exploring clients' road maps to success steers them toward an empowering adventure.

After 3 weeks of using SFBC with at-risk middle school students, the school secretary reported that she had asked these students the same two questions. The first was, "Do you want to come back and see the counselor again?" They enthusiastically responded, "Yes, I would like to do that." And the follow-up question was, "Do you think he (the counselor) wants to see you?" They emphatically responded, "He sure does!" These students had gained confidence by recognizing they were capable of being successful and were ready to demonstrate they could do it again. Students seemed pleasantly surprised that a counselor or administrator would talk to them about what they were doing right, when their past experiences were generally negative because discussions focused on what they were doing wrong. A fourth-grade boy commented at the beginning of a second session, "I like coming here, for this is the first time anyone has talked to me about the things I do good." Friends of some of the students who had been counseled requested counseling for themselves and made comments such as, "Bridget isn't getting in trouble anymore, so I want you to fix me up like you did her." Accenting children's previously unrecognized resources challenges them to prove their competency.

The fifth assumption concludes that clients' goals are viewed in positive terms, reflecting what clients want to do, rather than in negative terms, reflecting the absence of something they don't want to do. It is unlikely that clients can picture something not happening. To do this, clients must envision something else occurring in its place. For example, try to imagine yourself not arguing with your parents. You will either see yourself arguing with them or see yourself doing something instead of arguing. Constructing a goal of *not* doing something is unproductive because it cannot be measured. As clients relate their goals in negative terms, recounting what they don't want, counselors are charged with helping clients identify positively worded goals that reflect what they do want to happen. Clients are empowered as they envision themselves accomplishing a measurable goal.

ADDITIONAL GUIDING CONCEPTS

In addition to the foregoing assumptions, several supplemental concepts provide a road map for implementing this model.

Concept 1: Avoid Problem Analysis

Philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein once said, "It's a mistake to look for an explanation when all you need is a description of how things work" (source unknown). SFBC addresses what is working for children instead of exploring the etiology of their problems.

Rudy, a sixth-grade boy, was referred to me because he could not control his temper, which resulted in his cursing and fighting in school and in the trailer court where he lived. Because of his outbursts, his mother and stepfather were being threatened with eviction. Rather than embarking on an in-depth exploration of the causes of his temper, cursing, and fighting, we focused on when this wasn't a problem for him. This emphasis reinforced Rudy's ability to control himself.

Concept 2: Be Efficient With Your Interventions

One goal is to get clients in and out of counseling as quickly as possible. Typically, therapists spend much time trying to discover the source and cause of problems; in contrast, the solution-based counselors go for solutions that work. Counselors must avoid making clients dependent on them for long-term answers when all they may need is a nudge to start them on their path toward their own solutions. With time constraints often dictating school counselors' agendas, getting the most accomplished in a minimum number of interventions is essential.

A 13-year-old middle school boy named Derek saw a friend shoot himself in the head with a 22-caliber pistol. Four days after the incident, he requested counseling. With just a few interventions, Derek began to recognize solutions he already was doing occasionally. When he felt he needed to express his feelings about the incident, he was able to initiate a conversation with the victim and his mother. He also recognized that sometimes he needed to be physical, so he played basketball to relieve his tension. One meeting with Derek to identify the solutions that he already had started to construct was all it took to relieve his troubles.

Concept 3: Focus on the Present and Future

When counselors help clients identify what will have to happen in their world to tell them they no longer need counseling, it conveys

the presupposition that things will be better in the future. Having clients paint this picture of how their present and future will look when they are successful and devoid of their problems sends a clear message that counselors believe in their clients' abilities to overcome their adversities. This also suggests to clients that counselors are concerned with their present and future adjustments. Past events are only emphasized in the process of finding exceptions to problems. In contrast, most conventional therapeutic approaches expect clients to investigate and understand the past as a precursor to changing their behavior. This can be so overwhelming to many clients that they use the past as a scapegoat to inhibit personal growth. Solution-focused counselors find that once clients begin to see themselves doing the desired behaviors, their perception of the past changes and exploring the past becomes unnecessary. Getting clients to take action first shows them that they are able to succeed regardless of previous obstacles.

James, an eighth-grade boy, was sent to me because of his low self-esteem. He had fallen off a bike when he was 8 years old and nearly died from the resulting head injury. He took longer than others his age to formulate responses to my questions. He spoke in a slow and deliberate manner, often saying that the questions I asked were hard to answer. However, given enough time, he was able to process information quite well. He was failing most of his classes, except for several D's. His goal for counseling was to stop feeling dumb and to feel smart sometimes. Focusing on the present, we searched for occasions when he felt a little less dumb or even a little smart. Additional interventions helped James identify what he was doing for himself to enable that to happen. He identified that he had been more successful and felt more okay about himself when he blocked out distractions in class so he could focus on what the teacher was saying. During one of our sessions I asked James how he was able to stay focused on our session when loud outside noises were permeating the room. After thinking about the question for a few moments he replied, to his amazement, "I watched your lips." He also reported feeling better about himself when he went to the library after school to do his homework instead of going home, and when he asked to be tutored during the last period of the day. James did improve several of his grades to D's and C's, and he even scored 100% on a science test for the first time. These improvements helped him feel smarter.

Concept 4: Focus on Actions Rather Than Insights

Children's levels of cognitive development limit their ability to comprehend insights about their problems. Insight development also requires a time commitment that students and counselors do not have. Furthermore, Metcalf (1995) points out that "knowing why we are the way we are doesn't offer solutions. As students discover why they are sad, angry or shy, they often use the information as a symptom and reason for not succeeding" (p. 19). As a result of Freud's influence, the psychological community has espoused the belief that clients need to know why they got to be the way they are and that this insight is required for change. Yalom (1995) argues against this position because he has found that insight is not necessary for change to occur.

I worked with a 12-year-old girl, Tiffany, who was referred because she repeatedly fought with other students and argued with and swore at her grandmother and her teachers. She was on the verge of being removed from the honors program and placed in a class for students with behavior disorders. Because her mother didn't want Tiffany, her grandmother was raising her. Many non-solution-focused counselors would have pursued insights surrounding her hostile behavior as it might relate to her mother's rejection. However, because Tiffany's goal was to get along better with classmates, teachers, and her grandmother, counseling targeted what she was doing (her actions) during the times when she was able to control her temper and get along even a little better with them. By our third meeting, she had improved so much that she was no longer being considered for the behavior disorder class and was asked to tutor some of the children with behavior disorders at a neighboring elementary school once a week. She was so effective that the elementary school behavior disorder teacher requested that Tiffany come to the school every day. Moreover, her grandmother was reported to have commented, "I like my new Tiffany better." Although Tiffany still had her ups and downs, her behavior and relationships improved significantly.

SUMMARY

SFBC has been shown to be an effective and efficient counseling approach (DeJong & Berg, 1998; LaFountain et al., 1996; Littrell,

Malia, & Vanderwood, 1995; Thompson & Littrell, 1998) that will enable school counselors and administrators to provide counseling to their students. By focusing on solutions rather than problems, counseling becomes brief. The emphasis on students' strengths and resources stimulates students' confidence.

PRACTICE EXERCISE

The following exercise will help you see the impact on clients when the interview shifts from a problem to a solution focus.

- Think of a recent problem that is causing you some difficulty. Answer the following questions about this problem:
  - When did this problem begin?
  - What seems to be the cause of this problem?
  - How often does this problem occur?
  - What keeps this problem going?
  - What do you do to overcome this problem?
- Note the effect these problem-focused questions have on you.
  - Are you left with a sense of direction about how to overcome your issue?
  - Do your answers to these questions help you come to a resolution of this problem?
  - As you think about what you have just experienced, are you left with feelings of hope or hopelessness?
  - Do your answers leave you feeling empowered?
- Using the same problem, answer the following questions:
  - When do you not experience this problem during problem times?
  - What's different about the times when you don't have this problem?
  - How do you explain that this problem doesn't happen then?
  - How do you keep this from being a problem then?
- Note the effect these solution-focused questions have on you.
  - Are you left with a sense of direction about how to overcome your issue?
  - Do your answers to these questions help you come to a resolution of this problem?

As you think about what you have just experienced, are you left with feelings of hope or hopelessness?
Do your answers leave you feeling empowered?

- Notice the different reactions you experience when answering problem-oriented versus solution-oriented questions.
  Which ones seem to be more helpful to you?
  Which ones help you be more responsible?
  Which ones might lead to enhancing your self-esteem?

Your answers most likely would have led you to conclude that solution-focused questions were more productive for you and would be of more benefit to your students as well.